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A History of the



San Francisco Police Department

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HISTORY OF THE SAN FRANCISCO POLICE DEPARTMENT

California, as we know it today, had much of its real beginning in 1769 during the period of Spanish military control and the colonization by Father Junipero Serra and a small band of dedicated missionaries. Each Mission was a cultural center located only one day's journey from the next, established at sites selected for their beauty and accessibility.

California passed quickly from Spanish to Mexican rule. On July 7, 1846, formal possession of California, in the name of the United States, was taken by Commodore Sloat with the raising of the flag at Monterey. Two days thereafter, the incident was repeated in Portsmouth Square at what was then the Pueblo of Yerba Buena (later San Francisco) by Captain John Montgomery.

Early Yerba Buena was more of a village than a city; a seaport that lay sprawling on the barren stretches of sand, rock and surrounded on three sides by water. On August 6, 1846, the settlement's first American peace officer, Navy Lieutenant Washington A. Bartlett, was appointed, "Alcalde," an office similar to Mayor or Chief Magistrate. On January 30, 1847, Bartlett issued an edict stating that from that time on, Yerba Buena would be known as San Francisco.

The first crude semblance of an organized police department was established in 1847 under the leadership of George Hyde, who had succeeded Bartlett as Alcalde. Hyde had been instructed by the military governor of California to hold an election for the selection of six men to assist him in maintaining law and order in San Francisco. These six men were the town councilmen and, in addition to helping to run the town government, each councilman was expected to "constitute himself a conservator of peace within the limits of the town," and "preserve the peace and morals of the place," for which police services he was to receive no compensation.

Violation of a number of offenses carried penalties of cash fines or labor on the public works; these offenses included assault, theft, forcible entry into a house, "the firing of a gun within one mile of Portsmouth Square," and "the killing or maiming of carrion fowls." Another regulation declared: "Be it ordained that from and after the 12th day of November 1847, all property owners desiring to dig wells upon their premises, or who now may have them dug, shall, under penalty of fifty dollars fine, carefully close and fence or box, them in." Merchants bartenders, and other businessmen were also subjected to special fees, regulations (with fines for violation) and bonding procedures, most of which were intended to raise money for civic improvements.

Then, on January 24, 1848, gold was discovered in Sutter's millrace on the American River; when the evidence reached San Francisco's nearly 900 inhabitants, Sam Brannan, publisher of the town's first newspaper, "The California Star," led the first gold rush which, within a week, left only seven inhabitants behind.

The irresistible urge to find "golden fortunes" in California had spread to all corners of the globe; by 1850, San Francisco's population reached the sum of 30,000 persons. Thousands of ships entered the port bringing with them the adventurers, the fortune seekers, deserters, and other castoffs seeking to ply their nefarious trades. These and their like eventually came to populate the notorious area of the city known as the "Barbary Coast." Many were former convicts from England's penal colony in Australia, popularly called "Sydney Ducks."

One other group of such unsavory characters was a semimilitary group known as the "San Francisco Society of Regulators," popularly called the "Hounds." They formed themselves into companies established headquarters in a tent near Portsmouth Square, and made nightly raids into sections of the town populated by foreigners. One of their favorite targets was "Spanish Town," located at the base of Telegraph Hill, which was primarily populated by Chileans. They ruined the tents of these immigrants, took whatever loot they wanted, and set fire to whatever was left. During one such raid, one of their members was killed, so they pillaged the entire section, destroying the tents and shooting the occupants as they fled.

The following morning, outraged citizens met and issued a call for volunteers to help the police restore order. The "Hounds" met their end that afternoon when their leaders were arrested. They were brought to trial and sentenced. They suffered banishment with the threat of death if they returned.

In August 1849, Colonel John W. Geary was elected as San Francisco's Alcalde and under this capable leader an old vessel, the Euphemia, was brought and outfitted as a jail; a police force of thirty men was inaugurated, and San Francisco's peace was preserved fairly well. Arrests from September 4, 1849 to March 26, 1850 totaled 741. Crime in the city was not then at the frightening proportions sometimes attributed to the days of the Gold Rush. On May 1, 1850, Malachi Fallon, a miner who had formerly been the keeper of the New York prison known as the "Tombs" became City Marshall. His task was to organize, control and appoint his 34-man police force.

Crime began to steadily increase. The hoodlums who had been driven out of the mining camps by lynch-mobs were coming in droves to San Francisco. The growing arrogance on the part of criminals, together with frequent fires which many thought were set by marauding gangs, and a popular feeling that law enforcement had all but ceased to function, led in 1851 to the formation of the first San Francisco Vigilance Committee, headed by Sam Brannan. The Committee was not, as popularly believed, a hysterical lynch-mob. The Vigilante tried 91 cases; 41 were subsequently released; 15 were handed over to local authorities; 14 banished; one whipped and only four hanged. The Committee voted itself out of existence in 1852.

On June 18, 1851, the department under the command of Robert G. Crozier received its first completely recorded police complaint. Crime again was on the increase and this sparked the formation of the Second Committee of Vigilance in 1856. After three months of operation, the Second Committee of Vigilance (sometimes called "The Great Committee of 1856") hanged four criminals and deported 25 others. The Committee is remembered for the fact that it arrested a Justice of the State Supreme Court, David Terry, after he had stabbed and almost killed a Committee leader. The Committee of Vigilance disbanded after three months of operation.

In 1856, the office of "City Marshall" was eliminated and James F. Curtis, one-time leader of the Vigilantes, was installed as San Francisco's "Chief of Police," commanding a 150-man force. At this time, under a Consolidation Act, the City and County of San Francisco were made one. Since most of the remaining crooks were hiding out in San Francisco proper, many law-abiding citizens moved south to the newly created San Mateo County.

The following years were marked by the evolution of the department from a rather loose-knit unit into a more efficient, well-disciplined and semimilitary force.

Martin J. Burke was Chief from 1858 to 1865. It was during Burke's term as Chief that a system of military drill formation of the police was inaugurated; this type of assembly could be used in case of riots or other emergencies. The Board of Supervisors at that time prescribed that regular officers on duty wear uniforms. During this period the San Francisco Police Department became the first department in the nation to use photography in police work.

From 1865 to 1874, Patrick Crowley was Chief. Now there were five police stations, including the Harbor Police. Around this period, police along the tough waterfront areas carried knives when on duty for knives were easier to whip out in emergencies than guns. A patrolman would never know when he might be attacked in dark waterfront alleys and warehouses. Some policemen got to be quite expert at handling their knives.

During the last half of the Nineteenth Century and the early part of the Twentieth, crime concentrated itself in two main areas of the city: The Barbary Coast and Chinatown.

The criminality of Chinatown residents, contrary to popular contemporary belief, has been highly exaggerated. The crimes attributed to the Chinese were actually perpetrated by a small percentage of Chinatown residents. In fact, the main Chinese community was itself terrorized by such criminal elements as the warring Tongs and tried frequently to rid itself of them.

The first Chinese reached California in the summer of 1848, about five months after the discovery of gold. These were mainly scholars and gentlemen. They were later followed by a flood peasantry who were imported to work in the mines. The tide of immigration increased even more when the railroads began to lay a transcontinental track. By 1882, one-seventh of the California population was Chinese.

In the late 1850's, an organization, known as the "Six Companies," was formed. It was a consolidation of six mutual Chinese protection brotherhoods. All legitimate business in Chinatown was controlled by the Six Companies.

However, crime plagued the community. The Chinese Six Companies tried to stop it, unsuccessfully. For many years open prostitution was allowed to go on; coercion, legal trickery, apathy and bribery assured that neither the police, nor the courts, nor the municipal government would close it down. The California Legislature passed a "Red Light Abatement Act" in 1914 in an endeavor to crush the slave brothels. Such was the power of the Tongs that until 1914, there were only token raids on the slave houses, which met with limited success.

The use of opium was also a widespread problem. Opium addiction and its frightening results became so ominous that the municipal authorities passed an ordinance which had some effect in abolishing opium dens for a while.

To help stop Tong wars, the Six Companies organized the Chinese Peace Society in 1913, to arbitrate the Tong disputes. Wars did occur after that date, they were suppressed by the Peace Society with the backing of law enforcement agencies.

Patrick Crowley was Chief from 1858 to 1865. Theodore Cockrill succeeded Chief Crowley until 1876 when Henry H. Ellis, a brilliant detective, became Chief.

John Kilpatrick was Chief during the bloody Kearney race riots in 1877.

In 1878, at a strength of 400 men, the San Francisco Police Department became the largest single police force in the West. In April of that same year, the office of Chief ceased to be elective and became appointive.

This period was also troubled by the "Barbary Coast", a district which was crawling with criminals. Thieves and other felons operated there almost without restraint. Many were selling doped whisky to sailors, and then shanghaiing them for sea captains who would pay cash for a crew. One character known as Calico Jim, shanghaiing six policemen, one by one, as they came to his house to arrest him. After this episode, Calico Jim deemed it prudent to leave town. Legend has it that when the policemen got back from their cruises they drew lots to see which one would take revenge on the crimp. It is said that the "cop" who won tracked him to Peru and emptied a revolver into him right on the street.

Prostitution was the foundation on which the Barbary Coast was built; the story of the Police Department and the Barbary Coast is largely one of efforts to stop the trade, efforts which were ineffective for more than half a century because of legal trickery, graft, bribery, and the indifference of the decent population.

In 1880, former Chief Crowley again filled the position of Chief of Police. In 1888, \$20,000 was appropriated for a police patrol wagon and signal system. The first signal box went into operation on November 7, 1890; the signal system enabled an officer to call the patrol wagon by the police signal box and transport his prisoner by wagon instead of on foot.

The California Legislature of 1891 was one of the most corrupt in California history. Among other curious acts, a bill was passed creating 200 new jobs in the San Francisco Police Department. One Examiner reporter discovered that if payment of \$400 were made to a certain pair of grafters, practically anyone could become a policeman. The reporter sent \$400 to the contact man in Sacramento, and the Police Commissioners received a letter shortly afterwards recommending the appointment of a certain Thomas Stoley (a fictitious name used by the reporter). The letter,

strangely enough, was signed by the very Assemblyman mainly responsible for passage of the bill enlarging the police force.

In 1896, a Democratic candidate was elected Mayor. James D. Phelan, a man of high ideals. He appointed a committee of 100 to draft a new city charter; surprisingly, the new charter made Phelan for all practical purposes an autocrat over city affairs. Among other things, the new charter gave the Mayor's Office full power to appoint the Police Commission. In 1897, Isaiah W. Lees, internationally famous for his ability as a detective, became Chief. On February 13, 1900, William P. Sullivan was appointed Chief, followed in 1901 by George Wittman.

Father Caraher, the Irish pastor of the Roman Catholic Church of St. Francis and chairman of the Committee on Morals of the North Beach Promotion Association, was a tireless crusader against vice. He blockaded brothels and dives with volunteer pickets, used political and religious pressure against such establishments and took every means and opportunity to harrass those responsible. Chief Wittman gave his fullest cooperation. Police were having a hard time slowing down the prostitution traffic because corrupt courts were seldom inclined to back up police action.

Jeremiah Dinan was Chief from 1905 to 1907. It was during his administration that the police car made its first appearance in San Francisco in 1906.

At 5:12 a.m. on April 18, 1906, San Francisco and its population of 350,000 were rocked by an earthquake that registered an 8.25 Richter magnitude. After a ten second pause, a second and equally devastating shock followed, reducing buildings to piles of rubble and bursting gas and water mains. It was only through the quick action of Chief Dinan that most police records were salvaged and protected in Portsmouth Square. When an occasional spark ignited the records, the fires were put out with confiscated beer, there was no water available due to the damage of the earthquake! Police and firemen were assisted by troops in keeping people away from dangerous areas and in preventing looting, but the city was never placed under martial law.

On September 13, 1907, former Police Commissioner William J. Biggy was appointed Chief. Chief Biggy conducted a vigorous anti-vice campaign and closed a place which was known as the "Municipal Brothel." It was primarily owned by men connected with the city government. Thereafter, he was ordered removed from office for undisclosed reasons. The Chief refused to accept the dismissal and on November 30, 1908, crossed the Bay of San Francisco in a police launch to confer with Hugo Keil, one of his supporters on the Board of Police Commissioners. Biggy left Keil's house in a cheerful mood and was seen to embark on the boat for his return to the city. The Chief's body was found in the Bay about a week later. Chief Biggy's death remains one of the most intriguing mysteries of the century.

On December 26, 1908, Jesse B. Cook was selected to fill the position made vacant by the death of Chief Biggy. The new Chief was a rather colorful character: before becoming a police officer, he had been a tumbler, an acrobat and an actor. Chief Cook, like Biggy, worked to clean up vice in San Francisco and is known especially for his cooperation with Father Caraher in his anti-vice crusade.

During Chief Cook's administration, the Fingerprint Identification System was put into operation. Incidentally, to date, with millions of prints on file throughout the world, no two fingerprints have yet been found to be completely identical. The use of the police motorcycle was also introduced.

John B. Martin was appointed Chief following the resignation of Cook in January 1910. In October of the same year, Martin resigned and Captain of Inspectors, John Seymour, was appointed Chief.

Seymour is remembered mainly for what happened when he was fired. After a period of political unrest, David A. White was selected as Seymour's successor. Unfortunately, Seymour was not officially notified of White's appointment and so for more than a week the department had two Chiefs of Police issuing orders and generally confusing everyone involved.

Chief White was chosen from the business world and he did not have any police experience prior to his appointment as Chief. However, he turned out to be an excellent, capable leader. White was a firm believer in keeping complete and accurate records and he is generally recognized as the father of the department's modern records system.

In 1915, San Francisco hosted the Panama-Pacific Exposition. In the same year, a Charter Amendment allowed Katherine O'Connor, Kathlyn Sullivan and Katherine Eisenhart, later known as the "Three Kates," to become the first Women Protective Officers of San Francisco working for the Captain of Inspectors.

A trusted aide to Chief White, Daniel J. O'Brien, became Chief in 1920. O'Brien was one of the founders of the California Peace Officers' Association. He was a strong advocate of a Federal Clearing House of Crime Information. Chief O'Brien personally assisted in the formation of the present F.B.I. and he contributed over 200,000 fingerprints and photographs from the criminal files of San Francisco.

Up to this time, when a man joined the force, he was given a stick, a badge, and a gun and told to go out and catch some criminals. This, of course, had some bad effects on the Department. Chief O'Brien realized the importance of physical and academic police training and so he established the Department Police Academy in 1923 - the first such academy in the nation.

Also in 1923, a member of the Traffic Bureau was assigned to organize the Public School Traffic Reserve and so San Francisco had its first traffic boys - also the first in the nation. In 1928, this program was extended to the Parochial Schools and in 1931, it was officially designated as the School Traffic Patrol. By 1936, the School Traffic Patrol had become a nationwide program and at last report, at least in San Francisco, there had never been one child killed under this program.

Chief O'Brien retired in 1928, followed by William J. Quinn whose tenure in office ran twenty-two years. During his administration, the police became rather tragically involved in the waterfront strike of 1934.

Charles W. Dullea, a famous detective, was Chief from 1940 to 1947. Dullea won widespread praise for this effective administration during World War II and the policing of the World Peace Conference in 1945. At the request of the Federal Government, during 1945 commissioned officers of the U.S. Military Services were trained in police organization and administration at the San Francisco Police Academy.

With the outbreak of World War II, it was feared that an attack might be made on the Pacific Coast. The Deputy Chief of Police was given orders to organize and train an Auxiliary Police Unit. As a result, a 36-hour course was given these men in police procedures, military drill, first aid, chemical warfare, bombs and firearms. This unit was part of the Civilian Defense Corps. In 1944, the Auxiliary Police were incorporated into the Police Reserve. Their duties included policing the downtown area during congested hours and directing traffic during special events.

Dullea was succeeded briefly by his Deputy Chief, Michael Riordan. On January 13, 1948, Riordan was replaced by Michael Mitchell who was followed by Michael Gaffey from 1951 until late 1955, during which time the Tenth Commemorative Sessions of the United Nations were held in San Francisco. George Healy was Chief for three months following the retirement of Chief Gaffey.

On February 1, 1956, Francis J. Ahern was appointed Chief of Police. He was formerly in charge of the Homicide Squad, had graduated from the Federal Bureau of Investigation Training School in Washington and served as a special investigator for the Senate Crime Investigating Committee.

The Planning and Research Bureau was formed in 1956. This unit is charged with the continuing study of the policies, procedures and operational problems of the Department and all phases of budgeting.

Also in 1956, there came into being the San Francisco Police Department's Intelligence Unit. This Unit is directly charged with the gathering, analyzing, recording and dissemination of information relating in any manner to organized crime and criminals.

On April 1, 1958, the Central Warrant Bureau came into existence. This Unit is charged with the responsibility of accounting for every criminal warrant issued by the City and County of San Francisco.

Chief Ahern died on September 1, 1958. On September 8, 1958, Thomas J. Cahill was appointed Chief of Police. Chief Cahill and Chief Ahern had worked closely together, first as partners in the Bureau of Inspector's Homicide Detail and again with the Kefauver Crime Committee. In addition to Chief Cahill's numerous duties as Chief of the San Francisco Police Department, he served as President of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

The Police Department in 1961 moved into its new Hall of Justice. For the first time in a city of this size all the agencies relating to the Law Enforcement field were housed in one building. In addition to the police units, the new Hall of Justice also houses the Traffic, Municipal and Superior Criminal Courts, District Attorney's Office, Public Defender, Adult Probation, Coroner's Department and the Disaster Council Corps.

Chief Cahill organized a Community Relations Bureau. This Unit is charged with establishing contact with organizations and groups within the community and holding meetings with these groups to promote the common objectives.

In the latter part of 1962, a Police Dog Patrol Unit was established and to date has proven itself a valuable asset to the department.

During the latter part of 1965, the Bureau of Complaint, Inspection and Welfare was initiated. The primary purpose of this unit is to investigate complaints made against members or the Department.

The San Francisco Police Department, during the same year, entered the Auto-Status Program. This program provides information relative to automobiles stolen, wanted, etc., throughout the State of California, and is part of a statewide network of major police jurisdictions and the California Highway Patrol. This is a computerized system which provides for instant information relative to automobiles.

During 1969, the Crime Prevention Headquarters Company was organized for the purpose of concentrating street patrol in areas of high crime. It consists of four units: Crime Prevention, Tactical, Dog, and Helicopter Squad.

Chief Cahill retired in February 1970. On February 9, 1970, Deputy Chief Alfred J. Nelder was appointed Chief of Police.

As Deputy Chief, he organized the "S" Squad (Safe Streets through Selective Enforcement) in 1958 to deploy a large number of veteran officers in high crime areas two days a week. More recently, this unit has been expanded into a Crime Prevention Unit which operates seven days a week in high crime areas and which is a part of the Crime Prevention Headquarters Company.

Over the years, Chief Nelder had worked very closely with the Police Athletic League and had actively participated in most of their programs. He was keenly interested in youth programs throughout San Francisco.

The Police Youth Program Unit of the Juvenile Bureau, which was initiated on March 3, 1970, was designed by Chief Nelder to be the action vehicle of crime prevention, police awareness and police-people consciousness. At present, the unit is involved with the San Francisco Schools in informational lectures, "rap" sessions, drug abuse programs, police vehicle observer teams, classroom field trips, bi-lingual lectures and counseling. Police Youth Program's ultimate design is for total Police Department involvement and dedicated follow-through to create understanding and guidance of our youth by all the members of this Department.

During his tenure in the Police Department, Chief Nelder had received numerous meritorious citations for bravery. One of his outstanding achievements was solving the Moskovitz kidnapping case in 1954.

Chief Nelder outlined a 3-point plan to reduce crime: (1) the assignment of as many policemen as possible to street duty to fight hardcore crime; (2) emphasis on crime prevention programs, particularly among youth; and (3) expansion of the Police-Community Relations Program to involve the total community.

Chief Nelder retired on September 24, 1971 and was succeeded by Deputy Chief Donald M. Scott. Chief Scott has had a varied career. While coming up through the ranks, he has worked on various assignments in the Patrol Division.

Since his appointment to Lieutenant 1953, he headed the General Works Detail (1952-1964). Between 1964 and 1966, he served as a Platoon Commander at the Mission and Central Stations. He then successively headed the Burglary and Robbery Details until his appointment as Captain in 1968.

During his tenure as Captain, he first was assigned to the Supervising Captain's Office, and in 1969 was transferred to Central Station as the Commanding Officer, where he remained until his appointment as Deputy Chief in February 1970.

Chief Scott has initiated a Department reorganization that is currently under study. Also under development are many innovative programs designed to meet the varied needs of the community and the rapidly changing Police role.

